

**WAC 458-20-217 Lien for taxes.** (1) **Introduction.** This rule provides an overview of the administrative collection remedies and procedures available to the department of revenue (department) to collect unpaid and overdue tax liabilities. It discusses tax liens and the liens that apply to probate, insolvency, assignments for the benefit of creditors, bankruptcy and public improvement contracts. The rule also explains the personal liability of persons in control of collected but unpaid sales tax. Although the department may use judicial remedies to collect unpaid tax, most of the department's collection actions are enforced through the administrative collection remedies discussed in this rule.

(2) **Tax liens.** The department is not required to obtain a judgment in court to have a tax lien. A tax lien is created when a warrant issued under [RCW 82.32.210](#) is filed with a superior court clerk who enters it into the judgment docket. A copy of the warrant may be filed in any county in this state in which the department believes the taxpayer has real and/or personal property. The department is not required to give a taxpayer notice prior to filing a tax warrant. *Peters v Sjöholm*, 95 Wn.2d 871, 877, 631 P.2d 937 (1981) *appeal dismissed, cert. denied* 455 U.S. 914 (1982). The tax lien is an encumbrance on property. The department may enforce a tax lien by administrative levy, seizure or through judicial collection remedies.

(a) **Attachment of lien.** The filed warrant becomes a specific lien upon all personal property used in the conduct of the business and a general lien against all other real and personal property owned by the taxpayer against whom the warrant was issued.

(i) The specific lien attaches to all goods, wares, merchandise, fixtures, equipment or other personal property used in the conduct of the business of the taxpayer. Other personal property includes both tangible and intangible property. For example, the specific lien attaches to business assets such as accounts receivable, chattel paper, royalties, licenses and franchises. The specific lien also attaches to property used in the business which is owned by persons other than the taxpayer who have a beneficial interest, direct or indirect, in the operation of the business. (See subsection (3) below for what constitutes a beneficial interest.) The lien is perfected on the date it is filed with the superior court clerk. The lien does not attach to property used in the business that was transferred prior to the filing of the warrant. It does attach to all property existing at the time the warrant is filed as well as property acquired after the filing of the warrant. No sale or transfer of such personal property affects the lien.

(ii) The general lien attaches to all real and personal

nonbusiness property such as the taxpayer's home and nonexempt personal vehicles.

(b) **Lien priorities.** The department does not need to levy or seize property to perfect its lien. The lien is perfected when the warrant is filed. The tax lien is superior to liens that vest after the warrant is filed.

(i) The lien for taxes is superior to bona fide interests of third persons that vested prior to the filing of the warrant if such persons have a beneficial interest in the business.

(ii) The lien for taxes is also superior to any interest of third persons that vested prior to the warrant if the interest is a mortgage of real or personal property or any other credit transaction that results in the mortgagee or the holder of the security acting as the trustee for unsecured creditors of the taxpayer mentioned in the warrant.

(iii) In most cases, to have a vested or perfected security interest in personal property, the secured party must file a UCC financing statement indicating its security interest. [RCW 62A.9-301](#). See [RCW 62A.9-302](#) for the exceptions to this general rule. The financing statement must be filed prior to the filing of the tax warrant for the lien to be superior to the department's lien.

(c) **Period of lien.** A filed tax warrant creates a lien that is enforceable for the same period as a judgment in a civil case that is docketed with the clerk of the superior court. [RCW 82.32.210](#)(4). A judgment lien expires ten years from the date of filing. [RCW 4.56.310](#). The department may extend the lien for an additional ten years by filing a petition for an order extending the judgment with the clerk of the superior court. The petition must be filed within ninety days of the expiration of the original ten-year period. [RCW 6.17.020](#).

(3) **Persons who have a beneficial interest in a business.** A third party who receives part of the profit, a benefit, or an advantage resulting from a contract or lease with the business has a beneficial interest in the operation of the business. A party whose only interest in the business is securing the payment of debt or receiving regular rental payments on equipment does not have a beneficial interest. Also, the mere loaning of money by a financial institution to a business and securing that debt with a UCC filing does not constitute a beneficial interest in the business. Rather, a party who owns property used by a delinquent taxpayer must also have a beneficial interest in the operation of that business before the lien will attach to the party's property. The definition of the term "beneficial interest" for purposes of determining lien priorities is not the same as the definition used for tax free transfers described in [WAC 458-20-106](#).

(a) **Third party.** A third party is simply a party other than the taxpayer. For example, if the taxpayer is a corporation, an officer or shareholder of that corporation is a "third party" with a beneficial interest in the operation of the business. If the corporate insider has a security interest in property used by the business, the tax lien will be superior even if the corporate insider's lien was filed before the department's lien.

(b) **Beneficial interest of lessor.** In some cases a lessor or franchisor will have a beneficial interest in the leased or franchised business. For example, an oil company that leases a gas station and other equipment to an operator and requires the operator to sell its products is a third party with a beneficial interest in the business. Factors which support a finding of a beneficial interest in a business include the following:

(i) The business operator is required to pay the lessor or franchisor a percentage of gross receipts as rent;

(ii) The lessor or franchisor requires the business operator to use its trade name and restricts the type of business that may be operated on the premises;

(iii) The lease places restrictions on advertising and hours of operation; and/or

(iv) The lease requires the operator to sell the lessor's products.

(c) A third party who has a beneficial interest in a business with a filed lien is not personally liable for the amounts owing. Instead, the amount of tax, interest and penalties as reflected in the warrant becomes a specific lien upon the third party's property that is used in the business.

(4) **Notice and order to withhold and deliver.** A tax lien is sufficient to support the issuance of a writ of garnishment authorized by [chapter 6.27 RCW](#). [RCW 82.32.210](#)(4). A tax lien also allows the department to issue a notice and order to withhold and deliver. A notice and order to withhold and deliver (order) is an administrative garnishment used by the department to obtain property of a taxpayer from a third party such as a bank or employer. See [RCW 82.32.235](#). The department may issue an order when it has reason to believe that a party is in the possession of property that is or shall become due, owing or belonging to any taxpayer against whom a warrant has been filed.

(a) **Service of order.** The department may serve an order to withhold and deliver to any person, or to any political subdivision or department of the state. The order may be served by the sheriff or deputy sheriff of the county where service is made, by any authorized representative of the department, or by certified mail.

(b) **Requirement to answer order.** A person upon whom service has been made is required to answer the order in writing within

twenty days of service of the order. The date of mailing or date of personal service is not included when calculating the due date of the answer. All answers must be true and made under oath. If an answer states that it cannot presently be ascertained whether any property is or shall become due, owing, or belonging to such taxpayer, the person served must answer when such fact can be ascertained. [RCW 82.32.235](#).

(i) If the person served with an order possesses property of the taxpayer subject to the claim of the department, the party must deliver the property to the department or its duly authorized representative upon demand. If the indebtedness involved has not been finally determined, the department will hold the property in trust to apply to the indebtedness involved or for return without interest in accordance with the final determination of liability or nonliability. In the alternative, the department must be furnished a satisfactory bond conditioned upon final determination of liability. [RCW 82.32.235](#).

(ii) If the party upon whom service has been made fails to answer an order to withhold and deliver within the time prescribed, the court may enter a default judgment against the party for the full amount claimed owing in the order plus costs. [RCW 82.32.235](#).

(c) **Continuing levy.** A notice and order to withhold and deliver constitutes a continuing levy until released by the department. [RCW 82.32.237](#).

(d) **Assets that may be attached.** Both tangible assets, as a vehicle, and intangible assets may be attached. Examples of intangible assets that may be attached by an order to withhold and deliver include, but are not limited to, checking or savings accounts; accounts receivable; refunds or deposits; contract payments; wages and commissions, including bonuses; liquor license deposits; rental income; dealer reserve accounts held by service stations or auto dealers; and funds held in escrow pending sale of a business. Certain insurance proceeds are subject to attachment such as the cash surrender value of a policy. The department may attach funds in a joint account that are owned by the delinquent taxpayer. Funds in a joint account with the right of survivorship are owned by the depositors in proportion to the amount deposited by each. [RCW 30.22.090](#). The joint tenants have the burden to prove the separate ownership.

(e) **Assets exempt from attachment.** Examples of assets which are not attachable include Social Security, railroad retirement, welfare, and unemployment benefits payable by the federal or state government.

(5) **Levy upon real and/or personal property.** The department may issue an order of execution, pursuant to a filed warrant, directing the sheriff of the county in which the warrant was

filed to levy upon and sell the real and/or personal property of the taxpayer in that county. [RCW 82.32.220](#). If the department has reason to believe that a taxpayer has personal property in the taxpayer's possession that is not otherwise exempt from process or execution, the department may obtain a warrant to search for and seize the property. A search warrant is obtained from a superior or district court judge in the county in which the property is located. See [RCW 82.32.245](#).

**(6) Probate, insolvency, assignment for the benefit of creditors or bankruptcy.** In all of these cases or conditions, the claim of the state for unpaid taxes and increases and penalties thereon, is a lien upon all real and personal property of the taxpayer. [RCW 82.32.240](#). All administrators, executors, guardians, receivers, trustees in bankruptcy, or assignees for the benefit of creditors are required to notify the department of such administration, receivership, or assignment within sixty days from the date of their appointment and qualification. In cases of insolvency, this includes the duty of the person who is winding down the business to notify the department.

(a) The state does not have to take any action to perfect its lien. The lien attaches the date of the assignment for the benefit of creditors or of the initiation of the probate or bankruptcy. In cases of insolvency, the lien attaches at the time the business becomes insolvent. The lien, however, does not affect the validity or priority of any earlier lien that may have attached in favor of the state under any other provision of the Revenue Act.

(b) Any administrator, executor, guardian, receiver, or assignee for the benefit of creditors who does not notify the department as provided above is personally liable for payment of the taxes and all increases and penalties thereon. The personal liability is limited to the value of the property subject to administration that otherwise would have been available to pay the unpaid liability.

(c) In probate cases in which a surviving spouse is separately liable for unpaid taxes and increases and penalties thereon, the department does not need to file a probate claim to protect the state's interest against the surviving spouse. The department may collect from the surviving spouse's separate property and any assets formerly community property which become the surviving spouse's property. If the deceased spouse and/or the community also was liable for the tax debt, the claim also could be asserted in the administration of the deceased spouse's estate.

**(7) Lien on retained percentage of public improvement contracts.** Every public entity engaging a contractor under a public improvement project of twenty thousand dollars or more,

shall retain five percent of the total contract price, including all change orders, modifications, etc. This retainage is a trust fund held for the benefit of the department and other statutory claimants. In lieu of contract retainage, the public entity may require a bond. All taxes, increases, and penalties due or to become due under Title 82 RCW from a contractor or the contractor's successors or assignees with respect to a public improvement contract of twenty thousand dollars or more shall be a lien upon the amount of the retained percentage withheld by the disbursing officer under such contract. [RCW 60.28.040](#).

(a) **Priorities.** The employees of a contractor or the contractor's successors or assignees who have not been paid the prevailing wage under the public improvement contract have a first priority lien against the bond or retainage. The department's lien for taxes, increases, and penalties due or to become due under such contract is prior to all other liens. The amount of all other taxes, increases and penalties due from the contractor is a lien upon the balance of the retained percentage after all other statutory lien claims have been paid. [RCW 60.28.040](#).

(b) **Release of funds.** Upon final acceptance by the public entity or completion of the contract, the disbursing officer shall contact the department for its consent to release the funds. The officer cannot make any payment from the retained percentage until the department has certified that all taxes, increases, and penalties due have been paid or are readily collectible without recourse to the state's lien on the retained percentage. [RCW 60.28.050](#) and 60.28.051.

(8) **Personal liability for unpaid trust funds.** The retail sales tax is to be held in trust. [RCW 82.08.050](#). As a trust fund, the retail sales tax is not to be used to pay other corporate or personal debts. [RCW 82.32.145](#) imposes personal liability on any responsible person who willfully fails to pay or cause to be paid any collected but unpaid retail sales tax. Collection authority and procedures prescribed in [chapter 82.32 RCW](#) apply to the collection of trust fund liability assessments.

(a) **Responsible person.** A responsible person is any officer, member, manager, or other person having control or supervision of retail sales tax funds collected and held in trust or who has the responsibility for filing returns or paying the collected retail sales tax.

(i) A responsible person may have "control and supervision" of collected retail sales tax or the responsibility to report the tax under corporate bylaws, job description, or other proper delegation of authority. The delegation of authority may be established by written documentation or by conduct.

(ii) A responsible person must have significant but not

necessarily exclusive control or supervision of the trust funds. Neither a sales clerk who only collects the tax from the customer nor an employee who only deposits the funds in the bank has significant supervision or control of the retail sales tax. An employee who has the responsibility to collect, account for, and deposit trust funds does have significant supervision or control of the tax.

(iii) A person is not required to be a corporate officer or have a proprietary interest in the business to be a responsible person.

(iv) A member of the board of directors, a shareholder, or an officer may have trust fund liability if that person has the authority and discretion to determine which corporate debts should be paid and approves the payment of corporate debts out of the collected retail sales trust funds.

(v) More than one person may have personal liability for the trust funds if the requirements for liability are present for each person.

(b) **Requirements for liability.** In order for a responsible person to be held personally liable for collected and unpaid retail sales tax:

(i) The tax must be the liability of a corporate or limited liability business;

(ii) The corporation must be terminated, dissolved, or abandoned;

(iii) The failure to pay must be willful; and

(iv) The department must not have a reasonable means of collecting the tax from the corporation.

(c) **Willful failure to pay.** A willful failure to pay means that the failure was an intentional, conscious, and voluntary course of action. An intent to defraud or a bad motive is not required. For example, using collected retail sales tax to pay other corporate obligations is a willful failure to pay the trust funds to the state.

(i) A responsible person depositing retail sales tax funds in a bank account knowing that the bank might use the funds to off-set amounts owing to it is engaging in a voluntary course of action. It is a willful failure to pay if the bank does exercise its right of set off which results in insufficient funds to pay the corporate retail sales tax that was collected and deposited in the account. To avoid personal liability in such a case, the responsible party can set aside the collected retail sales tax and not commingle it with other funds that are subject to attachment or set off.

(ii) If the failure to pay the trust funds to the state was due to reasons beyond that person's control, the failure to pay is not willful. For example, if the person responsible for



remitting the tax provides evidence that the trust funds were unknowingly stolen or embezzled by another employee, the failure to pay is not considered willful. To find that a failure to pay the trust funds to the state was due to reasons beyond that person's control, the facts must show both that the circumstances caused the failure to pay the tax and that the circumstances were beyond the person's control.

(iii) If a responsible person instructs an employee or hires a third party to remit the collected sales tax, the responsible person is not relieved of personal liability for the tax if the tax is not paid.

(d) **Extent of liability.** Trust fund liability includes the collected but unpaid retail sales tax as well as the interest and penalties due on the tax.

(i) An individual is only liable for trust funds collected during the period he or she had the requisite control, supervision, responsibility, or duty to remit the tax, plus interest and penalties on those taxes. [RCW 82.32.145](#)(2).

(ii) Any retail sales taxes that were paid to the department but not collected may be deducted from the retail sales taxes collected but not paid.

(e) **No reasonable means of collection.** The department has "no reasonable means of collection" if the costs of collection would be more than the amount that could be collected; if the amount that might be recovered through a levy, foreclosure or other collection action would be negligible; or if the only means of collection is against a successor corporation.

(f) **Appeal of personal liability assessment.** Persons who receive a notice of a personal liability assessment under [RCW 82.32.145](#) are encouraged to contact the department's local field office that issued the assessment and request a supervisory conference if they dispute the assessment. If they are unable to reach agreement, any person who receives a personal liability assessment is entitled to the administrative and judicial appeal procedures provided by Title 32 RCW. [RCW 82.32.145](#)(4).

[Statutory Authority: [RCW 82.32.300](#). 00-16-016, § 458-20-217, filed 7/21/00, effective 8/21/00; 88-01-050 (Order 87-9), § 458-20-217, filed 12/15/87; Order ET 71-1, § 458-20-217, filed 7/22/71; Order ET 70-3, § 458-20-217 (Rule 217), filed 5/29/70, effective 7/1/70.]